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Deferring to Dad's Discipline
An appeal to experience of family life in Hebrews 12

1) Introduction

In the middle of an argument that the audience should regard their current sufferings as the loving discipline of their heavenly Father, the author of Hebrews refers briefly to his and his audience's own experience of family life: 'we had human fathers as our disciplinerers, and we respected them […] they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them' (Heb. 12.9-10).[1] This prompts us to ask what the audience's experience of family life was like, and what we may – or may not – infer about this from the text. It also, coming in a text written for oral delivery to a believing community, raises the pastoral question as to how this appeal to common experience of paternal discipline might have been heard. And, for those committed to Scripture's relevance and authority for Christian living today, it raises the question of how it might be heard in our own contexts.

In the UK in 2015, 25% of households with children were lone parent families;[2] in the parish I currently serve the figure is 40%.[3] The vast majority of these parents are women.[4] So it is not true that 'we all had human fathers'. It is also not necessarily true that 'we respected them' – the absent or abusive father is less likely to engender respect; and regardless of parental disposition, not all children respect their parents. Conversely, there are those fathers whose abuse or neglect does not stem their children's respect for them. The situation in the ancient world may not have been all that different: higher mortality rates and lower life expectancy, the impact of disease, war, and divorce, would mean that lacking a father was not uncommon;[5] similarly, some children did not respect their parents, and some parents, perhaps

[1] Unless otherwise stated, biblical translations are my own.
[2] This represents an increase from 22% in 1996 (Office for National Statistics, *Statistical Bulletin: Families and Households: 2015*, section 5, www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouseholds/2015-11-05#lone-parents, accessed 6 August 2016).
[3] Parish of Stranton All Saints, Diocese of Durham; highest in Diocese is 48%, highest in country is 59% (Church Urban Fund parish statistics, www2.cuf.org.uk/parish/130264, accessed 30 June 2016).
[4] In 2015 women accounted for 90% of lone parents and men for 10%, a ratio which has changed little since 1996 (ONS, *Families and Households: 2015*, section 5).
[5] Paul Veyne estimates that half of children in the Roman Empire had lost their father by the age of 20, 'La Famille et l'amour sous le Haut-Empire romain', *Annales: Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 33 (1978), 35–63, at 36, while Beryl Rawson cites comparable estimates that by the age of 15 there was a 63% probability of one's father still being alive, *Children and Childhood in Roman Italy* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), 226–27. Consider also the numerous references to the fatherless and widows in the OT, e.g. Exod. 22.22; Deut. 10.18; Job 29.12; Ps. 68.5; Isa. 1.17.

especially fathers, were overly harsh with their children.[6] The point stands then as now, and the question to be addressed is not only what this generalized appeal to the audience's experience tells us about family life, but also how it works, pastorally and socially – or even, whether it works at all.

Two brief comments are in order, one regarding Hebrews itself, the other regarding scholarship. First, Hebrews' ethical reflections are sparse in comparison to its extensive doctrinal exposition: as Knut Backhaus memorably puts it, 'the theological mountain goes into labour, and gives birth to a moral mouse'.[7] This both makes it harder to contextualize the reference to family life in Hebrews 12, and at the same time makes this reference all the more tantalizing for what it might tell us in what is otherwise, ethically speaking, a fairly thin document.[8] Secondly, beyond its well-known first three verses, the first half of Hebrews 12 has received relatively little attention in scholarship,[9] a lacuna which this essay aims to help fill by drawing attention to family ethics and to the author's use of experience in his argument.

The first half of this essay surveys portrayals of and expectations surrounding parental discipline in other relevant ancient sources; these indicate that Hebrews' position is very much at home in the ancient world. A close reading of Hebrews 12 in the second half of the essay, however, reveals a careful reticence in the way human fathers are presented, which suggests great pastoral sensitivity on the author's part. At the same time, he unabashedly promotes God as the perfect Father whose discipline we can trust, whatever our own experience of human discipline.

2) Paternal Discipline in the Ancient World

a) Ancient Near East and Old Testament

In ancient Mesopotamia the head of the household had ultimate authority over his family's affairs, and severe penalties or curses were prescribed if a child should dishonour his father.[10] Similarly, honour for both parents was a mainstay of the Mosaic Law (Exod. 20.12; Lev. 18.7; 19.3; Deut. 5.16, 27.16), its infraction sufficient ground for the death penalty (Exod. 21.15, 17; Lev. 20.9; Deut. 21.18-21).[11] Parents are responsible for educating and disciplining their children, as in Deut. 6.7-9, 'recite [these words] to your children and talk about them

[6] This can be inferred from exhortations against harshness (e.g. Eph. 6.4). Suetonius, *Life of Augustus* 65, lists examples of Augustus' severe treatment of his children.
[7] 'Es kreißt der theologische Berg, und er gebiert eine moralische Maus!' Knut Backhaus, *Der sprechende Gott: Gesammelte Studien zum Hebräerbrief* (WUNT 240; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 215.
[8] Note the teaching on marriage in 13.4.
[9] For previous studies see Günther Bornkamm, 'Sohnschaft und Leiden: Hebräer 12,5–11', in *Geschichte und Glaube* (BET 53; Munich: Kaiser, 1971), 214–24; Peter Rhea Jones, 'A Superior Life: Hebrews 12:3–13:25', *RevExp*, 82 (1985), 391–405; N. Clayton Croy, *Endurance in Suffering : Hebrews 12:1-13 in Its Rhetorical, Religious, and Philosophical Context* (SNTSMS 98; Cambridge: CUP, 1998); Matthew Thiessen, 'Hebrews 12.5–13, the Wilderness Period, and Israel's Discipline', *NTS*, 55 (2009), 366–79.
[10] Victor H. Matthews, 'Marriage and Family in the Ancient Near East', in Ken M. Campbell (ed.), *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003), 1–32, at 1–3, 16.
[11] Daniel I. Block, 'Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel', in Campbell, *Marriage and Family*, 33–102, at 92–93.

when you sit at home and when you journey on the road'.[12] This command is addressed to men (second person masculine singular verbs/suffixes), and the broader context of Deuteronomy and the whole OT suggests a patriarchal – or, better, patricentric – view of family life.[13] The term 'patricentrism' reflects that fact that, while the father did have authority over his family, the primary interest of the OT is in the restriction or right use of this authority, that is to say, on the father's responsibilities to his family more than his rights over them.[14]

Within the wisdom literature parental instruction is a common theme. The opening chapters of the Book of Proverbs are cast as the address of a father to his son, with repeated exhortations to listen to his teaching. There is mention of the mother's teaching (תורה / θεσμός) alongside the father's instruction (מוסר / παιδεία) in Prov. 1.8, and gender roles are in Proverbs employed symbolically, at least to some degree – the hearer is a son addressed by his father (e.g. 2.1; 4.1, 10, 20; 7.1, 24), but is also spoken to as the child of lady Wisdom (8.32); and the noble wife of Proverbs 31 speaks wisdom and teach kindness (31.26; note the mention of her children and household in 31.27-28). Proverbs also frequently commends discipline to its readers, whether or not this is directly connected to a parental figure (e.g. 4.13; 19.18; 23.12; cf. Ps. 119.66). Proverbs clearly envisages physical discipline, with several references to using or not sparing the rod (13.24; 23.13-14; 29.17).

There are a few places in which God is directly or indirectly likened to a father.[15] Proverbs 3.11-12 (cited in Hebrews 12) describes God's discipline as like a father's (in the MT); Deut. 8.5 also draws this direct comparison. In 2 Sam 7.14 God promises to be a father to David's son, and states that he will reprove him (יכח / ἐλέγχω). In the Song of Moses (Deut. 32.6) God appeals to his status as father and creator to shame the people for the way they have responded to him. And in Hos. 11.1-11, God is the father figure who nurtures a rebellious Israel as his son and ultimately refrains from imposing punishment. God's discipline is also described in contexts that do not directly evoke his fatherly role (e.g. Job 5.17; Jer. 2.30; 5.3).

b) Other Jewish sources

Turning to later Jewish literature, in the book of Sirach, Wisdom disciplines her children (Sir. 4.17) and the reader should accept Wisdom's discipline, just as the author did when young (51.26); the one who loves his son will beat and discipline him (μάστιξ, παιδεύω*;* 30.1-17); children are to be disciplined and made obedient (7.23). Philo also commends discipline, describing education as a rod that supports the actions of the virtuous (*Alleg. Interp.* 2.90). In

[12] Cf. also Exod. 12.26-27; 13.14; Deut. 32.7. Such instruction may have taken place particularly on the Sabbath, Victor H. Matthews, 'Israelite Society', in Bill T. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson (eds), *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books* (Leicester: IVP, 2005), 520–30, at 527.

[13] Victor H. Matthews, 'Family Relationships', in T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (eds), *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Leicester: IVP, 2003), 291–99, at 293–94. Note also the patrilineal system on which society was organized, Matthews, 'Israelite Society', 521.

[14] On 'patricentrism' see Block, 'Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel', esp. 40-44, 52-54. and 'The Patricentric Vision of Family Order in the Book of Deuteronomy', printed in this volume pp. XX–XX.

[15] Cf. also Exod. 4.22; Ps. 68.5; Isa. 63.16; 64.8; Jer. 3.19; 31.9.

line with the fifth commandment, children were expected to honour their parents (Sir. 3.2-16; Philo, *Decalogue* 165-66; *Spec. Laws* 2.224-36; Josephus, *Ant.* 4.260-64; *Ag. Ap.* 2.206).[16]

Numerous sources describe God's discipline: he has mercy on those who accept his discipline (Sir. 18.14; 4 Ezra 14.34; Wis. 12.20-22); he scourges his people, not for vengeance, but to admonish them (εἰς νουθέτησιν, Jdt. 8.27; cf. Sir. 23.1-2), or similarly, his trials are to test his people, unlike the torment visited on the ungodly (Wis. 11.9-10); discipline now averts vengeance later (2 Macc. 6.12-17; cf. Tob. 13.4-5). God's discipline is explicitly connected with his fatherly role in a number of places. Philo states that just as children are better off with tutors to discipline them, so we are better having God punish us for our sins rather than abandon us (*Worse* 145-46). In *On the Preliminary Studies* 177 he cites Prov. 3.11-12 and, in an argument similar to that found in Hebrews, notes that the proximity of the father–son relationship is evidenced by correction and reproof. God's punishment of Eve and the serpent in *On the Creation of the World* 156 is linked to his position as father. In the *Psalms of Solomon*, the righteous do not despise being disciplined by the Lord (3.4), and God corrects them like a beloved son (13.9; 18.4). Similar sentiment is found among the Qumran documents: children are to honour their parents because God is like a father (4Q418 9.17-18); he disciplines Israel like a man chastises his son (4Q504 3.5-7). Josephus describes God's discipline as like that of parents, not according to what his people deserve, but for the sake of admonition (νουθεσία, *Ant.* 3.311).

c) Greco-Roman sources

Under Roman law children were subject to the authority of their father (*patria potestas*) until his death, their release (*emancipatio*), or a transfer of responsibility to another *paterfamilias* (e.g., through marriage or adoption).[17] It was thus not uncommon for adult Romans to be legally minors,[18] on top of the moral expectation that children owed respect to their parents (*pietas in parentes*).[19] The absolute authority of *patria potestas* included rights to make and break a child's marriage, hold and administer his property, and even put him to death, although convention tempered these, especially the last.[20] In practice, it seems that parental roles were roughly equivalent between father and mother. Both were responsible for caring for their children's needs, and for providing moral guidance and education,[21] and it was natural that both should love their children.[22] Some sources associate mothers with indulgence and nurture, and fathers with severity and discipline (e.g. Seneca, *De Prov.* 2.5), though this may reflect a desired rather than an actual state of affairs. In the Greek-speaking

[16] David W. Chapman, 'Marriage and Family in Second Temple Judaism', in Campbell, *Marriage and Family*, 183–239, at 231–36.
[17] Household codes addressed the *paterfamilias* (the father or eldest son) on the basis of his assumed authority over his family; Craig S. Keener, 'Family and Household', in Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (eds), *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Leicester: IVP, 2000), 353–68, at 357.
[18] Veyne, 'La Famille', 35.
[19] See Seneca, *Ben.* 5.5.2-3, for the view that the benefits of parenting are appreciated only after it is past.
[20] Suzanne Dixon, *The Roman Mother* (London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 26–29; Keener, 'Family and Household', 357; Susan Treggiari, 'Marriage and Family in Roman Society', in Campbell, *Marriage and Family*, 132–82, at 134–41.
[21] Dixon, *The Roman Mother*, 111, 121, 131, 182.
[22] Rawson, *Children and Childhood*, 221–22, 236.

world, the Spartans were notorious for their harsh discipline and state involvement in the upbringing of children – Seneca uses them as an example, stating that such harshness stems from love and not hate for their children (*De Prov.* 4.11-12) – but even this unique system did not override, but was rather founded upon, parental authority.[23] A more measured regime is found in Plutarch, who recommends nursing by the child's own mother, and the father's active involvement in his children's education – using encouragement over corporal punishment, and not placing too many demands on them (*Lib. ed.* 5, 7, 9-13); as with the Romans, parental affection was appropriate or even commended (Aristotle, *Eth. nic.* 8.12.2-3).

In Greco-Roman literature, we also find God likened to a father. Seneca describes God as having the mind of father (*patrium*), accounting for his severe discipline (*De Prov.* 2.5-7); he is a glorious parent (*parens*) who raises his children strictly (*De Prov.* 1.5; cf. 4.11-12). Another perspective is offered by Epictetus: in his *Dialogues* he describes Zeus as a good king and father (βασιλέως, πατρός, 1.6.40) who freely gives humans their faculties without constraining how they are used. Fluid boundaries between the gods and humans perhaps facilitated perceptions of gods as fathers; for example, Heracles as Zeus' semi-divine son accepts his orders and the various exercises his father requires of him (3.26.31).

d) Early Christian sources

Within the New Testament there are clear if brief instructions for relationships between children and parents. Children are to obey and honour their parents (Col. 3.20; Eph. 6.1-3), including by providing for them in later life (Mark 7.9-13; 1 Tim. 5.8). Fathers are not to provoke (ἐρεθίζω, Col. 3.21) or anger (παροργίζω, Eph. 6.4) their children. Instead they are to bring them up in the Lord's discipline and instruction (παιδεία, νουθεσία, Eph. 6.4). More generally, Christians undergo discipline (administered by outsiders, 2 Cor 6.9; the church, 1 Tim. 1.20; 2 Tim. 2.25; or by God, 1 Cor. 11.32; Titus 2.12; Rev. 3.19), and kinship terminology is used within the church, whether of Paul as father to an individual (Phil. 2.22; Phlm. 10) or to a church (1 Cor. 4.15; 1 Thess. 2.11-12), of different ages and sexes within the church (1 Tim. 5.1, 4; 1 John 2.13-14), or of believers' adoption into God's family (Gal. 4.5-7).[24] In Galatians 3.24-25 the *law* is described as a tutor or disciplinarian (παιδαγωγός), and in the following chapter is likened to a guardian and steward (ἐπίτροπος, οἰκονόμος, 4.2).

Clearly the major development in the NT and other early Christian literature is the prominence given to God as father, a development which is not without precedent in the OT or the ancient world more generally, as we have seen, but which far outstrips anything found there. This usage is most prominent in John's Gospel (109 occurrences), but is also found in the Synoptics (a total of 63 occurrences) – always on Jesus' lips alone, apart from four exceptions in John – and in Paul's letters, including some of the earliest NT documents (e.g.

[23] Nigel M. Kennell, 'Boys, Girls, Family, and the State at Sparta', in Judith Evans Grubbs, Tim G. Parkin, and Roslynne Bell (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Childhood and Education in the Classical World* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), 381–95, esp. 391-92.

[24] Andreas Köstenberger emphasizes the priority of this eschatological application of kinship language to believers, whilst judging that biological family remains important within the NT, 'Marriage and Family in the New Testament', in Campbell, *Marriage and Family*, 240–84, at 268–69.

1 Thess. 1.1, 3). The Aramaic loan-word *Abba* (Gal. 4.6; Rom. 8.15) alongside the Gospels' evidence strongly suggests that this usage is rooted in Jesus' earthly teaching.[25] Indeed, although its interpretation is contested, Eph. 3.14-15 may imply not merely that God is a father but that human fatherhood is derived from and dependent on God's fatherhood.[26] Yet for all the prominence of the title 'father' for God in the NT, it is striking that it should be associated with God's discipline only in Hebrews 12.

e) Conclusion

Despite variations in emphasis and specific details and customs, a number of common themes emerge that hold true across much of the ancient world:

1) parents, and particularly fathers, hold the ultimate responsibility for disciplining their children;
2) as a corollary of this, it is expected that children will acknowledge and accept discipline from their parents;
3) more broadly, discipline is commended in and of itself, regardless of who administers it;
4) God or the gods are often said to exercise discipline towards people;
5) connected with this, it is sometimes explicitly stated that God or a god is or is like a father to human beings, as a way of explaining or accounting for his discipline.

3) Paternal Discipline in Hebrews

a) The family of God in Hebrews

The application of kinship language to God, Jesus, and Christians, which was seen to be widespread across the NT, is equally prominent in Hebrews.[27] Notably, such language operates strictly christologically: it applies to Christ and only through him to believers. God is his Father (1.5). Jesus, the Son, shared humanity in every respect (2.14, 17) except that he was sinless (4.15). This establishes a sibling relationship between Jesus and human beings (2.11, 12, 17; 3.1), qualifying him to deal with our predicament of slavery to the fear of death (2.15) through his atoning sacrifice (2.18), and his ongoing ministry enables him to sympathize with his siblings (2.18; 4.15; 7.25). Provided they persevere, believers are Jesus' brothers and sisters, sharers or partners in him and his heavenly calling, part of his household, over which he is faithful as a son (3.1, 6, 14). This close relationship between Jesus and believers entails a close relationship between believers and God: they are his children (2.13, 14), and he is their father (2.11, Jesus and believers are 'all of one', ἐξ ἑνὸς; 12.7, 9); believers are, or at least will be, part of an assembly of the firstborn (12.23), and as such God's heirs.

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[25] Larry W. Hurtado, 'God', in Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (eds), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Leicester: IVP, 1992), 270–76, at 271, 273–74.
[26] Markus Barth discusses four interpretative options but declines to rule out or opt decisively for any of them, *Ephesians* (ABC 34; 2 vols; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 1.379-84.
[27] The most extensive study of family imagery in the letter is Amy L. B. Peeler, *You Are My Son: The Family of God in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (LNTS 486; London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

Hebrews also shows careful concern for genealogy and physical descent, going to some lengths in chapter 7 to get round Jesus' non-priestly descent from Judah, and using Levi's descent from Abraham to argue for the superiority of Melchizedek's priesthood over Aaron's. For Hebrews, family clearly matters. Family patterns shape the way in which the people of God are understood, and are in turn reconstituted into the ultimate family, whose importance prevails even over and above physical descent.

b) The argument of Hebrews 12

We turn now to the argument of Heb. 12.5-13, which I will trace in five sections.

I. Scriptural exhortation (Heb. 12.5-6)

Hebrews 12.1-3 exhorts the audience to follow the example of the cloud of witnesses of chapter 11 and to look to Jesus, who provides both an example to follow and a guarantee that the race has been, and therefore can be, completed. Hebrews 12.4 is a transitional verse, moving from the exhortations of the previous three verses to state that the audience has not yet shed blood in their struggle against sin. Verse 5 adds that they have forgotten the exhortation that addresses them as sons, and goes on to cite Prov. 3.11-12. Framing an OT quotation as direct speech is characteristic of Hebrews, and although grammatically it is the exhortation that addresses the audience, we can suppose that God himself is the speaker:[28]

> My son, do not regard lightly the Lord's discipline,
> or grow weary when reproved by him;
> for it is the one he loves that the Lord disciplines,
> and he chastises every son he accepts.

The citation in Hebrews is very close to the LXX, except that it reads '*my* son' (υἱέ μου), like the MT.[29] The Hebrew text form of the MT is more conducive to the author's argument – in the second half of v. 12 it reads 'like a father' (וְכְאָב), making the identification of God as a father explicit. The Greek translators evidently read these consonants as the verb כָּאַב 'to cause pain', hence the translation with μαστιγόω, to chastise or whip; this reduces the paternal and intensifies the punitive nature of the discipline.[30] The fact that Hebrews does not read 'like a father' suggests the author was not aware of the Hebrew text. There is discussion over whether the concept of discipline (παιδεία) is understood in a formative or punitive manner, both in the wider Greco-Roman and Jewish literature,[31] and specifically here in Hebrews. Thorough exploration of this question is beyond the scope of this essay, but it is

[28] Peeler, *You Are My Son*, 147–48.
[29] This addition is natural (so Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 361; Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 648), or arguably intensifies God's fatherly position (so Peeler, *You Are My Son*, 149–51.). It is lacking in Philo's quotation of the same verse in *Prelim. Studies* 177.
[30] Philo, *Prelim. Studies* 177, also reads μαστιγοῖ in Prov. 3.12.
[31] See the discussion of ancient sources in Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, 77–161.

clear that Hebrews does not develop the punitive aspect of discipline that is explicitly present in the Greek version of Prov. 3.11-12 the author uses.[32] The audience are not sinless, but here it is primarily their encounter with external hardship that is in view, and not trouble caused by their own sin.[33] Nevertheless, in the biblical tradition it is hard to force any absolute separation between punishment and formation – rather, discipline incorporates aspects of both.[34]

II. First argument: discipline implies legitimacy (Heb. 12.7-8)

Following the quotation, the author draws out its implications in vv. 7-8, exhorting his hearers to persevere for the sake of discipline.[35] He backs this up by making more explicit the father–son relationship between God and believers: God is treating them as sons. He then adds a rhetorical question, 'for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?' This is not a direct appeal to the audience's own experience of family life, but it is an appeal to a generally recognized truth: sons undergo discipline from their fathers. This observation is well attested in the contemporary literature, as we have seen. The negative corollary of this is then stated in v. 8: if they are without discipline, they are illegitimate and not sons. The parenthetical remark in v. 8, 'in which all are sharers', is a reference to 'all sons', casting back to the general truth stated in v. 7. Yet the noun 'sharer' (μέτοχος) is also one of the author's favoured terms for believers – they share in a heavenly calling (3.1), they are sharers in Christ (3.14) and in the Holy Spirit (6.4). Its use here subtly reinforces the overall argument that sharing in sonship entails sharing in discipline as well.[36]

At this point, it is worth pausing to address a question of translation: throughout 12.5-10 should we read 'fathers' and 'sons' or, as the NRSV has it, 'parents' and 'children'? It is not enough to point to the use of the term πατήρ, which in the plural can refer to both parents and indeed does in Heb. 11.23, where it denotes Moses' parents – his father *and* mother. Equally the term can refer to ancestors more generally (as in 1.1; 3.9; 8.9; and probably 7.10 of Abraham). The term υἱός in the plural also does not automatically refer only to sons, and its use in Hebrews 12 is at least partly conditioned by the intended similarity to *the* Son, Jesus. However, I suggest that it is helpful to maintain the father–son terminology for several reasons: 1) Hebrews uses the term παιδιόν in chapter 2 (but never τεκνόν) and could have used it here; 2) υἱός and πατήρ in 12.7 occur in the singular, suggesting a point is being made not about a child and a parent, but specifically about a son and a father; 3) the contemporaneous evidence outlined above suggests that the association of fathers in particular with discipline was relatively commonplace; 4) practically, the NRSV translation obscures the careful analogies and differences established between human fathers and the divine Father in phrases such as 'fathers of flesh'/'father of spirits', as we shall see below.

[32] Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 649.
[33] So Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, 196–214; Peeler, *You Are My Son*, 151–53. See Georg Bertram 'παιδεύω', *TDNT* 5 (1967) 596-625, at 621, for the opposite view.
[34] So William L. Lane, *Hebrews* (WBC 47; 2 vols; Dallas: Waco, 1991), 2.420.
[35] Taking ὑπομένετε as an imperative; Ellingworth reckons the expository context favours the indicative, *Hebrews*, 650.
[36] Bornkamm, 'Sohnschaft und Leiden'; Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, 220.

To return to the verses in question: alongside Proverbs 3, one of the few places in the OT where the theme of God's fatherly discipline occurs is Deut. 8.5. Like Heb. 12.7, this passage describes and justifies God's discipline of his people by appeal to the general truth that a father disciplines his son.[37] Not only does Hebrews draw on proverbial wisdom that fathers discipline their sons, it also draws on a biblical theme which connects this to God's discipline of his people.

III. Second argument: qal wahomer *based on experience (Heb. 12.9-10)*

The author then turns to a further argument. This is like the previous one in that it relies on a relationship of similarity between God as father and human fathers. Yet it is also different in that it appeals more explicitly to the audience's experience, and employs a *qal wahomer*, 'how much more' line of argument. Much work has been done on this form of argumentation, also known as *synkrisis*,[38] which is of huge importance for Hebrews as a whole.[39] The key point for our purposes is that there is a move from something that is known and accepted as good or true, to something that is less well known or accepted, or even completely unknown, and that is to a superlative degree better.

In v. 9 we have moved from the generalized question 'what son is there whom his father does not discipline?' to a concrete statement, 'we had human fathers as our discipliners and we respected them'. As we have seen, these reciprocal duties were expected in the ancient world. It is in the comparison drawn that things become interesting, as this diagram helps show:

v. 9a	**v. 9b**
furthermore	shall we not much more
we had fathers of our flesh[40]	to the father of spirits
as our discipliners[41]	
and we respected them;	be subject
	and live?

Note in v. 9b the explicit marker of a *qal wahomer* argument, 'much more' (πολὺ μᾶλλον). This presumes that the rightness of the basis of comparison has been accepted – arguing from

[37] David M. Allen, *Deuteronomy and Exhortation in Hebrews: A Study in Narrative Re-presentation* (WUNT 2.238; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 79–82.

[38] On *synkrisis* and its importance for understanding Hebrews, see the recent thorough pair of articles by Michael W. Martin and Jason A. Whitlark, 'The Encomiastic Topics of Syncrisis as the Key to the Structure and Argument of Hebrews', *NTS*, 57 (2011), 415–39; 'Choosing What Is Advantageous: The Relationship between Epideictic and Deliberative Syncrisis in Hebrews', *NTS*, 58 (2012), 379–400.

[39] *Qal wahomer* occurs in 9.14 (πόσῳ μᾶλλον); 12.9, 25 (πολὺ μᾶλλον); cf. also πόσῳ χείρονος, 10.29, and 'such a great salvation', 2.3.

[40] In Hebrews 'flesh' (σάρξ) does not have the negative connotations it takes on in Paul's σάρξ–σῶμα distinction, instead meaning simply 'earthly', 'bodily', or 'human' (see Heb. 2.14; 5.7; 9.13; 10.20). Even in 9.10 the reference is to 'regulations for the body' (NASB, NRSV), rather than something inherently sinful, as 'carnal ordinances' (KJV) might suggest.

[41] Παιδευτής ('instructor', 'disciplinarian', 'teacher') often conveys the meaning of παιδεία under discussion here (cf. Hos. 5.2; *Ps. Sol.* 8.29); Attridge, *Hebrews*, 362.

a known to an unknown. Next comes the verb, 'be subject' (ὑποταγησόμεθα), a strong word suggesting active submission and obedience whereas 'respect' (ἐντρέπομαι) connotes an attitude of regard but no more. 'Father of spirits', denoting God,[42] artfully reverses the designation 'fathers of flesh': not only does the Greek have an ABBA` pattern (flesh-fathers-father-spirits), there is also a singular-plural-singular-plural pattern.[43] The greater status of God is suggested both by his singular nature and by the fact that he is father of spirits, not simply a father of flesh. The most significant part of the statement, however, is the final two words. As can be seen from the chart, there is no outcome stated for our respect of human fathers and their discipline, yet one *is* stated in regard to God, in final, emphatic position: '*and live*'. This result echoes the promise attached to the fifth commandment, 'that your days may be long in the land' (Exod 20.12; Deut. 5.15; Eph 6.2-3), and the exhortation in Deut. 30.19-20 to 'choose life'.

The comparison between human fathers and God as father continues in v. 10, implicitly carrying over the *qal wahomer* argument and amplifying God's excellence:

v. 10a	**v. 10b**
they	but he
disciplined (us)	[disciplines us]
for a few days	
as seemed best to them	for good
	so that we might share his holiness

Human fathers discipline for a short time – presumably the period of their child's minority – and they do so 'at their discretion' (κατὰ τὸ δοκοῦν αὐτοῖς),[44] as seems good or best to them. There is ambiguity as to whether this means for their children's benefit, so far as they could discern it, or whether it simply means as suited them, i.e. ultimately for their own benefit. The former is probably to be preferred, but in both cases it is humanly determined and not absolute.[45] Moreover, the ambiguity here might be deliberate, encompassing both good and bad experiences of human fathers. In the comparison with God's discipline, there is no corresponding statement regarding its length or duration; this and the omission of a verb (παιδεύω is clearly to be inferred) focuses all the attention on the two statements. God's discipline is 'for good' (ἐπὶ τὸ συμφέρον), absolutely and categorically: there is no question of misguided judgment or perception of what the good is.[46] While the argument proceeds from the known human exemplar to the less-known divine father, it is possible that Hebrews views God's fatherhood as prior and human fatherhood as derivative and dependent, as

[42] This is an unusual expression; in traditional Jewish formulations it may be used liturgically, cf. Num. 16.22; 27.16; also *1 Clem.* 59.3; 64.1. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 362, 363 n. 60. Note that God is described as father in Hebrews only here and 1.5 (in a citation), in contrast to frequent references to Jesus as Son.
[43] Cf. τοὺς τῆς σαρκὸς ἡμῶν πατέρας with τῷ πατρὶ τῶν πνευμάτων.
[44] Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 654.
[45] Human discipline is 'fallible', even if 'well meant', Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, 203.
[46] Croy, *Endurance in Suffering*, 204–5, notes that this is practically a Stoic slogan.

Christ's status as Son and the statement in 2.11 that we are all 'of one' (ἐξ ἑνός, 'all have one Father', NRSV) suggest.[47] Whatever one makes of this suggestion, God's fatherhood also functions as a model for human fatherhood, which should aim for the ultimate good of the children entrusted to its care. Finally, like in v. 9, no outcome of human discipline is mentioned, bringing out all the more emphatically the clear benefit of God's discipline: 'in order that we may share his holiness' (εἰς τὸ μεταλαβεῖν τῆς ἁγιότητος αὐτοῦ).[48]

In short, there is a recognition of the givenness, the rightness of paternal discipline; it is the basis for a *qal wahomer* argument, from human-human to human-divine relationships. Yet at the same time there is a marked reticence about the discipline of human fathers which suggests a degree of provisionality. Human fathers are not particularly commended,[49] the fact of their discipline is simply noted as a general empirical truth to which the audience has some degree of access. The author refrains from giving any clear indication of good outcomes of human discipline. This is no doubt partly to allow the good outcomes of God's discipline to shine all the more brightly. But it also testifies to a realism and pastoral concern on the part of the author. By avoiding holding up human fathers as a straightforwardly good example, the author makes allowance for mixed or varied experiences of human parenthood among his audience; he implicitly acknowledges the flawed human nature, the sinful self, from which – as he stresses so strongly elsewhere – Christ's sacrifice cleanses our conscience. He is pastoral, realistic, and sensitive to his audience's experience.

IV. Supporting consideration: the fruit of discipline (Heb. 12.11)

Verse 11 contrasts *our* experience of discipline with the *father's* perspective in the previous verse: while it is ongoing, discipline 'does not appear (οὐ δοκεῖ) pleasant but instead grievous'. The wordplay makes a subtle theological point: human discipline *seemed* good to our fathers, no discipline *seems* good to us, but God simply *does* what is for our best, and through it produces 'the peaceable fruit of righteousness'.

This is a common wisdom theme which appears in various guises. Diogenes Laertius records a comparable saying: '"The roots of education", [Aristotle] said, "are bitter, but the fruit is sweet"' (*Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 5.1.18). While the text postdates Hebrews by some 150 years the saying is certainly earlier. There are various thematic similarities but only two cognate terms – 'discipline' (παιδεία) and 'fruit' (καρπός) – which are relatively common and not unnaturally associated, such that it would be hard to posit any influence, were it not for a further strong echo a few verses later. In v. 15 the author precedes his warning about Esau with a warning that the audience should not allow any 'root of bitterness' to spring up – language very close to that found in Diogenes' aphorism.[50] Furthermore, the character of Esau is prominent in tradition as a negative example of a son relating to his

[47] Cf. also the discussion of Eph. 3.14-15 above. This would cohere with Hebrews' view of the relation of heavenly to earthly realities elsewhere, e.g. the tabernacle's derivation from the heavenly pattern (Heb. 8.5).
[48] Cf. μέτοχος/μετέχω elsewhere, and note above.
[49] Ellingworth goes so far as to suggest that they are criticized, *Hebrews*, 652.
[50] Compare τῆς παιδείας τὰς μὲν ῥίζας εἶναι πικράς (Diogenes) with μή τις ῥίζα πικρίας ἄνω φύουσα (Heb. 12.15).

father and failing to be subject to his discipline.[51] This additional echo, then, suggests that it is not implausible to suppose the author had in mind a phrase like the one Diogenes attributes to Aristotle.

V. Conclusion: keep going in trials (Heb. 12.12-13)

The argument concludes in vv. 12-13, with language drawn from Isa. 35.3, in a call to strengthen failing limbs and make straight paths. The first word, διό, is inferential and connects this exhortation to what precedes.[52] *Because* discipline is a sign of the community's legitimacy as God's sons, and *because* God's discipline, like the discipline of a human father but much more absolutely, tends towards our good, *therefore* keep going through this present hardship.

c) Other appeals to experience in Hebrews

It will be helpful, before moving towards a conclusion, to look elsewhere within Hebrews, to see if a similar dynamic can be discerned – that is, the author employing empirical argumentation, whilst at the same time recognizing that such experience is not uniform.

Hebrews refers to the audience's own specific experience as an assumed common ground for the author's argument, for example in Heb. 2.1-4 where he mentions the gospel message heard by the audience, its messengers, and the various accompanying wonders. But there are also more general appeals to experience which hold true for any hearer, as for example in 2.5-10, where after citing Psalm 8 the author says 'as it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him' – that is, mankind – 'but we see Jesus'. This appeal to experience is a fundamental step in the argument, introducing Jesus as the pioneer for the rest of humanity. Arguably it allows that we might see different things in different degrees of subjection to him; the point is simply that we do not see *everything* in subjection.

The most relevant example for our purposes comes at the end of Hebrews 9: 'just as it is appointed for humans to die once, and after this the judgment, so Christ, having been offered once […], will appear a second time' (9.27-28). This appeal is more subtle, referring not to something that 'we do' or that 'we had' (as in Heb. 2 and 12), but to something that is 'appointed'. Yet there is an appeal to experience – it is commonly agreed that people die once, because that is what we know from our experience of people who have died. Moreover, this allows for exceptions – it may be appointed for people to die only once, but some have in fact died twice, namely those who have been miraculously raised and subsequently died a second time. The resurrection accounts found in the OT and the Gospels, or others like them, were likely known to the audience. It is even possible, if speculative, that the miracles mentioned in 2.4 included resurrections.

Furthermore, Hebrews acknowledges the existence of such temporary resurrections. In 11.35, speaking of OT saints, the author states: 'women received their dead by resurrection; others were tortured, not accepting release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection'. This recognizes both that some were raised from the dead, and that their

[51] See Thiessen, 'Hebrews 12.5–13', 376–78.
[52] Lane, *Hebrews*, 2.426.

resurrection was a 'lesser' one, so to speak, a resurrection to this earthly life once again, by contrast with the 'better' one which awaits all the faithful, 'resurrection to a life that endures'.[53] That is to say, Hebrews' author knows that some people die twice, and yet still states that 'all people die once'. The admission of exceptions to the general, observable rule does not nullify its validity. In the same way, the assertion that we have all shared experience of paternal discipline, and respected it, allows for exceptions: it is a general, empirical rule, but not necessarily an absolute or universal one. And like Hebrews 12, in Heb. 9.27-28 this appeal to experience forms the basis for a comparison with Christ, patterning a divine truth on a temporal, observable one. Appeals to experience are part of the author's repertoire, deployed with great brevity but also to great effect at several points in the argument.

4) Conclusion: Experience, Discipline, and Perseverance

The foregoing study has implications for how we should regard Hebrews 12, and also for how Hebrews suggests we should regard ourselves. First, our understanding of Hebrews 12. This passage might be designated proverbial or aphoristic, drawing as it does on much common wisdom:[54] as we have seen, in both Jewish and Greco-Roman traditions the father held ultimate responsibility for discipline, and respect was a child's right response. What is more, the author of Hebrews not only directly quotes from Proverbs 3, but also echoes Deut. 8.5 and an aphorism attributed to Aristotle. In addition the passage might be described as typological, if one accepts Matthew Thiessen's cogent argument that the construal of hardship as discipline in Heb. 12.5-13 is patterned on the Israelites' endurance of discipline in the wilderness.[55] Yet neither of these descriptions does the passage full justice. This study suggests that the author's reference to paternal discipline is more than simply a stock reference to a generic cultural given. Instead, there is a real appeal to the audience's own family life, carefully crafted to allow for diverse experiences. Of course it is a false trichotomy to ask whether Hebrews 12 is proverbial *or* typological *or* empirical. Clearly it draws on aspects of all three. Yet the explicit appeal to experience, alongside the explicit and implicit references to proverbial statements, and also alongside the entirely implicit evocation of the wilderness generation, should be given its due place and emphasis. The author's argumentation, like his gospel, is embedded in the everyday lives and experiences of his audience; furthermore, he shows a pastor's and preacher's sensitivity to the reality and variety within this experience.

Secondly, and finally, our own self-understanding: for the author of Hebrews, the believer is among other things a member of God's family. He is keen to emphasize this, whatever our experience of our own human families may have been. As children of God, we are known and loved, redeemed, our consciences cleansed. But also, like any son, and supremely like *the* Son, Jesus, we must undergo discipline, training – and indeed the

[53] David M. Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of Resurrection in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (NovTSup 141; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 187, cf. 186–88.
[54] Attridge holds the whole passage to be largely 'proverbial', *Hebrews*, 359–65.
[55] Thiessen, 'Hebrews 12.5–13', 366–79.

suffering his audience was facing needed urgently to be reinterpreted as divine discipline. In Hebrews 12, the author draws and builds on positive experiences of human fathers to suggest that God as a father is even more excellent. Yet also, in acknowledgement of those whose fathers were absent, or who had negative experiences of their discipline, the author exercises a careful and deliberate reticence about human discipline. This is in contrast to God, who knows absolutely what is best, unthreatened by sin or flawed perspective. God is thus a positive model for all human fathers, but most importantly, whatever the outcome of our experience or flawed practice of human discipline, we can be sure that the outcome with our heavenly Father will be good, the ultimate good of sharing in his holiness. This knowledge changes the game, shifts our vision and perspective on whatever trials we currently face, and engenders the perseverance that the author so passionately desires.